

Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran, 40-year Rivalry that Unraveled Culture, Religion, Collective Memory in the Middle East, Kim Ghattas, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2020, 368.

Fatima Raza *

The Dutch-Lebanese journalist turned author Kim Ghattas poses a crucial question in this book that has befuddled Middle Eastern experts and writers for ages; “what happened to us?” She asks what went so wrong in the Muslim world to the extent that now all the Middle Eastern countries remain embroiled in deep conflicts of different types rendering the region unstable. This book narrates the story of 1979 and the four turbulent decades that followed; of turning points in the Middle East’s modern history that could explain how the people of this region ended up in these depths of despair. Years leading up to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and three crucial points in time that followed have been taken up as three sections of this book: a) the Iranian Revolution of 1979; b) Siege of Holy Mosque in Mecca by Saudi zealots; c) the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Kim Ghattas divides the book into three parts with fascinating sub-sections that present the history, causality and repercussions of the Iran-Saudi rivalry in a brilliant almost fictional manner of narration: Part I: Revolution, Part II: Competition and Part III: Revenge. Names of the various sub-sections have also been chosen to look like chapters of an alluring fiction such as “Bleeding Heart”, “Darkness” or “Black Wave.” It makes for a riveting read when Ghattas describes the story interweaving history, culture, language and religion together. In the first part, she describes the initial years of the Iranian Revolution, its conception, genesis and eventual transformation. Her method of describing personalities like Musa Sadr, Ayatollah Khomeini, Yasser Arafat and others is strikingly vivid and detailed in nature. It helps

* The reviewer is Research Associate, Centre for Middle East and Africa (CMEA), Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad.

capture the imagination of readers and builds an unforgettable image that may just last in one's mind forever.

The basic premise of the book seems to be a historical and analytical investigation of how religion has been used for political motives and objectives, for different politico-ideological movements and how the outcome has been nothing but chaotic. She also explains how leftists from Iran and Lebanon were initially part of the Iranian Revolution and how they nurtured the cause for years until 1979 when it was suddenly taken over by Islamists in Iran. She calls it the "hijacking" of the Iranian revolution by those who envisioned a theocratic state in Iran based entirely on religious principles.

The author's country of origin and her obvious partiality toward Lebanon is also visible especially in the first part of the book as she highlights Lebanon's role as a training ground for revolutionaries of different descent. Ayatollah Khomeini's role as the leader of Iranian Revolution is highlighted albeit in a rather biased manner; and seems to expose a biased mindset of the author. She debates that the leftists from the Freedom Movement of Iran (LMI) protected Khomeini in France but toned down his message of *Vilayat-e-Faqih* while translating his Persian into French. Thus, whilst admitting that certain LMI members tampered with his message while transmitting it to the world, Ghattas claims it was the other way around and that Khomeini "used" their resources for achieving his own motives.

However, apart from some biased instances, the book is an enjoyable read that solidifies Ghattas's claim to exceptional writing as she explores beyond political and normative trends and wades deep into culture, music and dialects. She dives into depths of the convoluted rivalry of Saudi Arabia and Iran that began with the Iranian Revolution but spreading like wildfire; reached Pakistan and Iraq wreaking sectarian havoc in both countries. It is quite clear that Ghattas is unapologetically critical of notions and leaders that glorify the gore and violence of revolutions. It is a stimulating and refreshing read for those who are students of International Relations, History, and Religion but most of all for those who are intrigued by the concept of 'revolution' itself.